



Anger In The Family

"Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured." – Mark Twain

Anger can be acidic to an individual, of course, but it can also erode family relationships if left untreated and unchecked. Anger is a complicated emotion that can be expressed in a number of different ways, both healthy and unhealthy. The goal for anger management is never to completely do away with it; that isn't possible nor would it be productive, but to understand the roots of anger, how it takes shape, and if it is indicative of some other emotions going on under the surface. If anger is left unchecked or unresolved, it can lead to isolation, family dissolution, addiction, and depression.

Anger can take many forms. In our mind's eye, we typically see anger as raging, yelling, aggressive, even violent. However, anger can also be expressed as withdrawn, moody, sarcastic, petulant, or annoyed. In other words, anger doesn't always have to be dialled to a 10 in order to be addressed;

those smaller moments or flashes of anger can be just as damaging on the individual as well as the family dynamic.

On an individual basis, anger can have incredibly detrimental effects on both your mental and physical health. Anger weakens your immune system and can increase the chance of heart or lung issues. It can also increase anxiety, stress, depression, and isolate individuals, cutting them off from the help they need. In a group dynamic, such as a family, anger can irrevocably damage relationships, push people away, and result in long term consequences such as divorce. Relationships that include patterns of anger or aggression can be stressful for all people involved. Bonds become tested when anger is expressed often and in unhealthy ways, particularly if opportunities for calm dialogue are replaced by rage-filled words and deeds. This can build up feelings of fear or resentment from the rest of the family, leading to avoidance and escalated conflicts.

When a family member becomes angry, it is critical to stop and talk to them about what they are feeling and how they

are expressing those feelings. Anger is often secondary, meaning that it is covering up another emotion such as fear, depression, anxiety, or hopelessness. Showing family members that it is acceptable to talk about feelings, even difficult ones like sadness or fear, reduces the need for anger to cover up these feelings. Doing check-ins with each family member, either individually or in groups like around the dinner table, can normalize these types of discussions and encourage each family member to share without fear of judgment. When we act through anger, it damages our family bonds, but when we express guilt, anxiety, or fear that underlies the anger as motivational tools, those bonds can begin to be repaired. The vulnerability at the heart of sharing feelings can bring family members closer together.

Anger is a seed that, when planted, rarely grows straight up. It branches out, affecting other peoples' lives in ways that may not be evident. With each new branch, someone is internalizing what was said or done through that anger, or seeing that anger as strength and modelling their own behaviour from it. As the roots grow deeper, those habits become more and more difficult to change. That isn't to say it's impossible. There are small changes you can make if you feel like your anger is being expressed in an unhealthy way:

Find a healthy way to express your anger.

Anger, like most emotions, can be expressed many different ways. Finding a way to funnel your anger into something safe and useful can help immensely. Try going to the gym to work it out, or grab a paintbrush and make a few brushstrokes on a canvas. Go for a walk and listen to some music that will bring your emotional temperature down. There are dozens of ways to safely manage your anger that doesn't involve yelling or aggression. Find something that works for you and would be available at a moment's notice.

Start writing stuff down.

Journaling can be a great outlet for anger. Externalizing the internal, writing down your feelings and thoughts, can bring clarity and objectivity to angry feelings,

particularly when they are hiding other emotions below the surface. Ask yourself what am I angry about? What other emotions are present? Who can I talk to about this? Keep in mind that journal entries don't need to be long or flowy; even just a few sentences can give you a good idea of what's going on in your head.

Create space.

When it comes to anger, nothing helps more than time. In the moment, creating some space between your thoughts and your behaviours can mean the difference between raising your voice at your family or going for a walk to calm down. Acting impulsively on angry thoughts never works out, so taking some deep breaths and communicating what you're feeling to those around you, then changing your behaviour (going for a walk, listening to some music) can be a major positive change.

Talk to a professional.

Mental health professionals can provide a safe, judgment-free zone to talk about your emotions. They can provide insight from their training and experience to show you how your anger is affecting yourself and those around you, and provide feedback on ways to reduce it or express it in a healthy manner. Contact us at Walmsley and we can connect you with a licensed, trained counsellor.

Families that have been affected by anger can heal, but it doesn't happen automatically. As discussed, anger affects each family member in different ways. One person may model their own behaviour on it, another may isolate and withdraw because of it. Either way, those family members become ill-equipped to deal with conflict and communication in ways that will stay with them forever unless it is properly addressed. Enacting some behavioural changes, modelling healthy emotional regulation, and engaging in counselling, either individually or with your family, can introduce positive changes into the family dynamic that will counteract the damage done by anger.



Being there matters.

Contact Us



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